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ABSTRACT

A kindergarten teacher sought to redirect violent and aggressive play in her classroom. Noticing that most of the aggressive acts came from a particular group of boys who played war-like games, she began daily discussions with the 24 kindergarten children about their free play in an effort to subdue aggressive and violent play. To counter images of television police shows that depicted chasing and shooting, the teacher brought in a police officer to explain the many duties of the police. A survey of the parents of 18 of the children indicated that most of the children preferred to watch television in their free time, that 22 percent played video games, that 50 percent played with action figures, and that 22 percent had toy weapons. After several weeks of redirecting the children's play, the teacher observed less aggressive and violent play in the classroom. (MDM)

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Just Who Are These "Bad Guys", Anyway?

An attempt at redirecting children's aggressive play

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ABSTRACT

Twenty-four kindergarten children were observed in their classroom during several periods of free play. Particular attention was given to the occurrences of aggression in their play and the circumstances surrounding them. Different strategies were implemented in an effort to redirect the aggressive acts. Results showed a slight decline in the children's aggressive play.

The dilemma

It has always been fascinating for me to watch children at play. Whether guided, goal-directed, or free play, children manage to engage themselves totally and take on different roles of their choice. What happens, though, when these roles they take on are violent, or aggressive ones? What is a teacher to do when kindergarten children in a classroom choose to "bomb" each other out of "homes"; crash their Lego aircrafts into each other, and shoot each other down to prove they are the "better one"?

This year, watching my kindergarten children play has raised many of these questions for me. Should I be permitting this type of play in the classroom? How, or should I even try, to change it?

Keeping in mind that play is one of the most natural and spontaneous activities for young children (Curry & Arnaud, 1995), I observed my kindergartners at play more closely. I noticed that most of the aggressive acts came

from a particular group of boys. While most of the girls paired themselves off into groups at the Writing Center, Listening Center, Home Center, Library, and Puzzle areas, boys grouped together and made guns out of cube-a-links, blocks, and legos. In every instance, there was a more powerful winner over a weaker, defeated "victim". Doris Bergen (1994), states, "Violent play themes are drawn from real life and fantasy" (p. 300). She writes that in this type of play, "the basic message being acted out...is that guns and other violent objects or methods can be effective in solving problems" (p. 300). Indeed, this very type of play was going on right inside my kindergarten classroom.

The issue of gender differences was one I had to explore further. What social factors, if any, were related to the different ways in which my boys and girls played in the classroom?

In "Gender Comparisons of Young Children's Social Interaction in Cooperative Play Activity", Lea Aush cites a study conducted by Lever (1978) in which she found that "boys were involved mainly in games with debatable rules that provided many opportunities for negotiation and conflict resolution. Girls...engaged more often in turn-taking games, in which there was little conflict" (p. 226).

Aush (1994) adds that in another examination of children's play by Dipietro (1981), results indicated that "boys' play was characterized by physical aggression,

whereas girls' interactions were characterized by more verbal interactions, suggestions, and play centering around novel interactions with toys" (p. 226).

A study conducted by Cillessen and Hubbard (1993) reported similar findings. Examined were the ratings of the instrumental effectiveness of aggression and assertion, by high, average, and low-aggressive boys. The boys rated the effectiveness of both types of strategies in the solving of social problems involving hypothetical and actual peers. The results indicated that high-aggressive boys rated aggression as more effective than low-aggressive boys.

I had wrestled with the idea of banning any kind of aggressive play in the classroom. Not only was it loud and sometimes harmful, but I noticed it lacked creativity and imagination as well. The children seemed to be imitating something they had seen and were playing it out over and over again. "...whenever something is imitated, it must be transformed through play in order to become meaningful and useful information to a child" (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1990, p. 22). It was clear to me that this type of imitation was more likely to cause injury than to foster development. Their fixation on it had become a problem.

In today's society, acts of violence and aggression are just about anywhere. It is not difficult for us to imagine where and how our children are picking up on these behaviors nor why their play is reflective of such acts. "Violence is a central part of children's experience. (It) becomes a

lens that children use to interpret new experiences and even guide their behavior" (Levin, 1994, p. 268). Media, music, toys, peers, literature, and television programming either directly or indirectly expose children to violence (Dodd, 1992). How can I, as an adult who cares and works with children, help them through their experiences with violence and guide them constructively through their play?

New Ideas

As Levin (1994) writes in "Building A Peaceable Classroom/Helping young children feel safe in violent times", having "The Safety Rule" can help if used as a vehicle to help children work through problems. Because aggression, as she writes, is a "common response to feeling unsafe" (p. 269), a teacher who incorporates this rule into the everyday curriculum can help children feel safe and give greater meaning to what is happening around them. I decided this was an important angle to incorporate into our already existing safety rule in our classroom, and led discussions with the children on what it means to feel safe, at home and at school. We discussed common situations that make us feel threatened and the best ways of handling them. The children all agreed that safety was absolutely necessary in their lives, and I immediately realized that I had to take a more active role in helping them to make sense of their fears and feelings when confronted with acts of violence and aggression, either in play or real life.

Because different factors affect the way that children play at home and at school, I decided to investigate a little to see if there were any similarities in the way my students played at home vs. school. I found it necessary to obtain some information from the parents of my students. Based loosely on the differences of school and home play mentioned in "Fostering Mutual Respect for Play at Home and School" (Brewer & Kieff, 1996), I put together a Play Survey which I thought would offer some important information on how my boys and girls spend their free time at home. I distributed the survey to the parents of my 24 kindergarten students.

I did not expect the survey to answer all the questions I had on how and why my kindergartners were playing so aggressively in the classroom. It was obvious to me, being an educator of young children, that children's play in two different settings would probably lead to different types or ways of playing. As Brewer & Kieff (1996) write, "interaction with peers, group size, materials and equipment, guidance and supervision, adult-child interactions, time commitments, organized planning and space availability" are the dimensions of difference which assist children in reaching their different goals through play (p. 92-3). I knew the kind of play opportunities I was offering my children in the classroom. Now, I wanted to know what and how they were playing at home.

In my four years of teaching kindergarten, my children

had always appeared satisfied playing with the classroom toys we had. They have had access to writing materials, building materials, paints, dolls, puppets, play food, home furniture, fabrics, hats, library and books, audio cassettes, puzzles, and many manipulatives. In the summer of 1996, I was able to order new toys for my classroom, which I did with much excitement. However, as the year progressed and the aggressive play continued despite my requests, I concluded that their interests were entirely different from what the classroom environment offered them. I then decided to institute a TOY DAY for my class. TOY DAY was one day of the week (Thursdays) on which the children could bring in one toy from home. The toy had to be reasonably sized (to fit in their bookbag for easy transport) and non-electric. The reasons for doing so were twofold:

1) I wanted to give each child the opportunity to bring in something I knew they really enjoyed playing with; something that they would be eager to show and share with friends; something that was their own and would therefore show pride in.

2) I was curious to see, firsthand, what it was they liked to play with; what they considered to be their favorite toy, and, in being so, how they would play with it. Would they still be playing aggressively? Would imitation still be a big factor in their play?

Four weeks after introducing TOY DAY, I had not seen

much difference in the children's play. Most of the boys brought in action figures, battleships, and war planes. The girls were quietly gathered around play make-up, baby dolls, and Barbies. While the materials themselves were different, aggressive play, among the boys particularly, continued.

After reading "Coping With Ninja Turtle Play in My Kindergarten Classroom" (Gronlund, 1992), I realized that my next step had to be an influential one. As Gronlund had done, I wanted to involve myself in the play of the children so as to learn more about their excitement and "fascination" with what they were doing. I could have banned the aggressive play in my classroom, but doing so would not have provided me with any answers to my questions, and it would not have helped my children in dealing with the aggression and violence around them. The only way I figured I could see through their eyes, so to speak, was to become one of them and become more active in their play. With eyes and ears more opened, I prepared myself to enter into the world of play in Kindergarten 105!

Taking the plunge

Daily discussions with my children about their free play was not as confusing as I thought it might be. They were more than eager to share their information with me. My growing interest in what they were doing and in who they were imitating led to some interesting revelations.

One example of this came from a group of four boys who spent too much time chasing and shooting each other. When asked to explain their scenario to me and where they got their idea from, they proudly responded, "From the TV show COPS! He's the bad guy shooting at us and we're the cops trying to under arrest him!"

As our discussions continued, I realized that the children's understanding of what police officers do was rather limited. They, particularly the same four boys, could only act out what they knew from television - that cops chase the bad guys with their guns. One boy felt he could not be a cop if he wasn't chasing and shooting others. This quickly led to a brief discussion about some of the other duties that officers carry out.

We discussed how officers are called to the scene of an accident to aid others, how they sometimes have to assist others to hospitals, how different types of emergencies that can occur at home call for the presence of police officers as well.

The reaction of the children was amusing. They knew that officers were called upon at different times for different types of emergencies, but it took them some time to realize that officers do not spend their entire day just chasing and shooting others. To help me on this particular topic, then, I invited a parent of one of my students, who is also a police officer, to come speak to the children. It was my hope that having an actual police officer, whom they

already knew, visit and explain her other important duties to them, would help the children focus on some of the more positive aspects of our society.

Included in this particular discussion was the fact that it is not only police officers that can stop someone from doing something wrong. We discussed how ordinary people who care about others can help those around them in different ways. This was not unfamiliar to the children, since Religion is incorporated throughout our curriculum in our school.

The concept of "changing" was also brought out during one of our play discussions. When one of the boys who frequently designated himself the "bad guy" decided to take on that role again, I asked him if the "bad guy" had a family, to which he replied "yes". I then asked the children how they thought the bad guy's mommy would feel when she received a phone call from the cops telling her that her son had been arrested. They immediately replied that she would be very sad, and that it would be better for the bad guy to "change".

Although this particular child then decided to change and be a "good guy", another quickly took on this former role. For this, however, he felt he needed to have a gun. When asked if he could be a bad guy without one, he replied, "No". I reminded him of some of the stories we had recently read, including "The Three Billy Goats Gruff" and "The Three Little Pigs". I asked if any of those characters, including

the "bad" ones, had used a gun, and they adamantly replied "NO!" Could he, then, play a bad guy without a gun, if the good guys didn't have one either? He agreed, and they did. There was no shooting during this play period, although the roles of good guy/bad guy were still clearly defined.

Survey Results

Of the twenty-four families surveyed, eighteen responded. The following are some of the questions and corresponding answers listed in the survey.

How does your child prefer spending his/her free time at home?

Sixteen of the eighteen, or 89%, stated that their child preferred watching television during their free time. In addition to television viewing, 78% of the parents stated that their child also enjoyed reading, writing and drawing; 50% stated their child also enjoyed solitary play; 44% stated actively playing with a sibling; 22% stated video games, and 17% stated that their child enjoyed using a computer.

What types of television programs does your child enjoy watching the most?

All eighteen families stated their child enjoys watching cartoons the most. In addition to the cartoons, 44% stated that Disney videos were also a favorite; 33% stated sitcoms; 17% listed educational programs; and 11%

added dramas to the cartoon viewing. As to how often, 56% of these programs are watched daily, and 44% are watched on a weekly basis.

Name the most-liked video(s) your child watches.

The responses to this ranged from Madeline, Barney and Disney videos, to The Mask, Jurrasic Park, and Independence Day.

How does your child react if/when s/he watches an aggressive act on television?

Three responses, or 17%, indicated that their child's television viewing of aggression is monitored or not allowed at all. Another 17% stated that their child has no reaction when viewing aggression on television. Twenty-two percent admitted that their child reacts aggressively when watching aggressive acts. Forty-four percent listed reactions such as shock, fear, or sadness.

Does your child play video games?

Twenty-two percent responded "yes" to this question. Some of the games played by these children included RoboCop, Street Fighter, Mortal Combat, Mega Man X, Sonic the Hedgehog, and Dashing Desperados.

Parents were also asked to indicate the types of toys their child played with at home. Seventy-two percent owned Legos or building blocks, which, according to the parents, were used creatively. Fifty percent indicated their child played with action figures (Power Rangers), and acted out different scenarios that were either watched on television, or created their own. Twenty-two percent owned toy weapons.

Other toys owned by the children also included dolls and accessories, 61%; vehicles, 67%; puzzles, 72%; and books, 94%. Parents indicated that the dolls, accessories, and vehicles were often used together in play situations.

Play Results

After about four weeks of daily play periods, I noticed something different about our play times. Although some of the children were still creating airplanes with Legos and making them war planes, I noticed that there had not been any chasing and shooting going on. None of the children, particularly those four boys mentioned earlier, had made guns from the cube-a-links, as they were so eager to do before. I never told them not to do it; I only presented them with suggested ideas, such as, "What would happen, if today, the bad guy did not have a gun?" or "How will you explain to your family why the officers were chasing you?" They ran around and "flew" planes after each other, but no sound of "Pow! Pow! Pow!" was heard nor scenes of dying were enacted.

To see if they could verbalize more specifically the slight change I was seeing, I went a step further. I told the children that I would act out for them a puppet show on a story familiar to them, "The Three Little Pigs". They, however, had to dictate to me the best actions for the characters to take. In other words, they would decide, when

it came time, if the wolf should eat the pigs, or if the pigs should get away from the wolf. I was surprised at the results! While very few, (2 or 3), wanted to see the pigs eaten up, most of the children insisted that the pigs get away. And as to the fate of the Big Bad Wolf? He was to become their friend and eat dinner <u>with</u> them, rather than have them <u>for</u> dinner!

Discussion

The puppet show presented to the children could have gone either way. The Big Bad Wolf could have gobbled up the pigs, as presented in some books, and the wolf could have ended up <u>being</u> the pigs' dinner. However, despite all the violence that children are surrounded with these days, it is natural for them to want to feel safe. No child, or adult, for that matter, thrives on feeling threatened. Here, they had a chance to change an outcome, and they did.

When given the opportunity, I think children would rather create a safer environment for themselves. That became apparent to me as I interacted with my kindergartners during their play periods. Their aggressive acts during play were brought on by threats of physical harm - the chasing and shooting. Not knowing how else to confront these threats, they responded by imitating what they had seen, and so, the cycle continued. When given the chance, however, and when presented with alternatives that made

sense to them, the children chose the safer and less violent outcomes.

It is of no surprise that children watch a great amount of television these days. Whether cartoons, dramas, or video movies, children find it easy to resolve conflicts in the manners shown on television. The boys in my class admitted that themselves when they imitated what they saw on "COPS". As the survey results showed, though, all of the eighteen children enjoyed watching cartoons. Is there violence in cartoons? During one 22-minute episode of a cartoon I watched, 52 acts of violence and aggression were committed. These included fighting, shooting, threatening, and verbal abuse. If 56% of these programs are being watched daily, and 44% weekly, just what are our children learning about conflict resolution? It is no wonder why they are "killing" each other during play time!

We, as educators and parents, have to provide our children with safer environments. It is not enough to point fingers at others and blame them for what is out there in the world our children are growing up in. We may not be able to stop the violence that is going on around all of us, but we can sure help our children understand that conflicts can be resolved in other ways. In my opinion, and based on what went on in my classroom, communication plays a vital role in this matter.

Listening to and talking with my kindergartners opened the door to redirecting their aggressive play. Suggesting

different scenarios, and placing even the "bad guys" in real places with real people familiar to the children, such as families and homes, led to a less imitative and more creative form of play. It may not have been much of a big change in my classroom, but it was significant, and it was a beginning. It was a beginning down a new and safer road; a road where every child belongs.

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